



Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah picks up the stories of Ezra and takes them further. The people had returned to the land following the decree of King Cyrus of Persia in 538 bc that all captives should return home. Chapters 1-7 tell of the rebuilding of the walls under Nehemiah despite opposition from the people of the land. The middle of the book (7.73b-10.39) recounts a ceremony which renewed the covenant between God and his people and celebrated the law. The final part of the book tells of Nehemiah's return to Judah as governor for a second time, including some of the reforms he undertook.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 1 hour
Short of time? Just read 1.1-2.10; 11.1-12.26; 12.44-13.31



Inspiring quotes

I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments."
(Nehemiah 1.5)

Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."
(Nehemiah 8.10)

They refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.
(Nehemiah 9.17)



Genre

History and Genealogies



About the Author

Jewish tradition states that Ezra wrote all of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

Most recent explorations of the book, however, have concluded that it is more complex than that. All four books (1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah) seem to have been collected together from a wide variety of sources. If you look carefully while you read you might be able to notice some of the joins in the text.

What do we know about him?

We know very little about which people finally put all the strands together in these four books.

We do know a little about the main character of the book – Nehemiah. His name is the long version of the name Nahum and means God comforts. He had risen to a position of influence in Persia as a civil servant and used these skills to help rebuild his beloved Jerusalem. In 2.6 he appeared before the queen. Since only eunuchs were allowed in the presence of the queen some wonder whether Nehemiah was also a eunuch.



About the times

This was a tumultuous time in Judah's history. The King and nearly everyone influential from the land had been taken away into exile in Babylon between around 598 and 586 bc. In 538 King Cyrus decreed that everyone could go home. The problem was that they had been away for around 60 years – most of the people 'returning' had never lived there in the first place.

What were people feeling?

The challenges of the return from exile made identity a key question in this period. What did it mean to be the people of God and what did they need to rebuild in order for them to be able to be God's people once more?

Other books set around this time

2 Chronicles, Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Joel



How is it structured?

- 1.1-7.73a Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls (which he did despite heavy opposition)
- 7.73b-10.39 Ezra read the law and led the people in renewing their covenant with God
- 11.1-13.31 Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem for a second time as governor and instituted a number of reforms



What kind of Book is it?

This is a history book but it falls into the category of what you might call theological history – history with a purpose. It is not telling the events solely so that you can know what

happened but so that you can understand why they happened. Many of the historical books of the Bible are like this.

There are also a large number of genealogies.



Look out for...

One of the key themes in Nehemiah is community action – Nehemiah and Ezra led the people back into relationship with God but also encouraged them to work together for the good of the city. Keep an eye out for the importance of community throughout the book.

As in Ezra, the phrase the 'hand of God' occurs more than once. Reflect on the use of this phrase when you see it (it comes in the first few chapters)

Prayer is very important both in this book and in Ezra. Notice the prayer when it comes, and how Ezra prays.



What could this mean for me?

Both Ezra and Nehemiah deal practically with the theme of recovery after an utter disaster. Reflect as you read on the theme of recovery, can you learn anything from them about how recovery happens and what needs to be in place to help recovery to take place?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did you think the book was about?
- You will notice that Nehemiah (a high official in the Persian court) was the recipient of vast opposition from Sanballat and the people of the land. It is worth spending some time discussing this. On the surface the case seems clear – Nehemiah was doing God's will and Sanballat was trying to get in the way. On the other hand it is worth reflecting on what it might have felt for the people of the land who had lived there while everyone else went into exile only to have Nehemiah – who had never lived there before his return – telling them what they should do. Discuss what they might have felt and what Nehemiah might have felt. Who was right and who was wrong do you think? Is 'right' and 'wrong' even a good question to ask?
- Chapter 13 presents Nehemiah as someone deeply passionate about what he thought to be right (he threw out Tobiah's furniture, contended with lots of people and even beat some of them and pulled out their hair). Was he right? Can you/should you defend this kind of behaviour on the grounds of your passion for what is right? Think about Christians today, what kind of behaviour do you think is acceptable on the grounds of passion? In real life? On social media?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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